



UNIVERSITY OF
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IFAS EXTENSION

Friday's Feature

By

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Preparing your lawn for drought

Spring has started on a dry note along the Gulf Coast. Drought conditions are unpredictable and can be difficult to deal with in the landscape. Although droughts are usually thought of as long periods of time, such as months or years, sandy Florida soils can experience drought conditions after only a few days without rain. Even if we don't have an outright drought this summer, preparing your lawn for dry weather is smart.

All plants require water. Although some plant species are large consumers of water, other species can be maintained with relatively low quantities of water. Many people consider turfgrasses to be large water consumers, but many turf species have excellent drought tolerance mechanisms. Bermudagrass, zoysiagrass, bahiagrass, and centipedegrass have the best drought tolerance of the southern turfgrasses, followed by St. Augustinegrass and carpetgrass.

Of course, all turfgrasses need water to survive. But turning on the sprinklers anytime you feel the lawn needs a drink tends to waste water, can damage your grass and can actually make it more dependent on water.

The primary objective of drought conditioning is to grow a good quality lawn that will survive on little or no supplemental irrigation. A drought conditioned lawn can withstand more stress than a lawn that is not conditioned. A properly prepared lawn will have a deep and extensive root system that is better able to seek out water.

Proper irrigation is the first step in conditioning a lawn for drought. Many people rely on their automatic sprinkler systems to apply small amounts of water several times weekly to their lawn, regardless of the amount of rainfall received. This practice is actually detrimental to the grass because it promotes a lawn that requires more water and one that cannot withstand tough stress. Less frequent, longer irrigations will assist in establishing a deeper, more viable root system.

To develop a deep root system, water your lawn when the first signs of wilt occur. When the lawn needs water, you'll see spots in the lawn that turn bluish-gray, footprints that remain in the grass long after being made, and many leaf blades folded in half lengthwise.

Apply enough water to wet the turf's rootzone. Along the Gulf Coast, ½ inch of water is generally sufficient. Do not water the lawn again until signs of wilt occur yet again. This technique works regardless of turfgrass species, soil type, season, or other environmental conditions. It may take up to six weeks to condition your turf to survive several days or more without wilting between irrigations or rainfall. During this time the root system is developing and growing deeper into the soil. In time, your lawn will establish a more uniform appearance with less thatch and a deeper root system.

Whether you use a permanent system or a sprinkler attached to a hose, it's important to know how much water you're applying. Not knowing your water application rate is like driving a car without a speedometer.

Different systems apply water at different rates. So, take the time to figure how much time it takes for your sprinkler system to deliver ½ inch of water. To do this, simply place several straight-sided cans or rain gauges in the area to be watered. Let the sprinkler run until ½ inch of water is delivered.

The time to deliver the proper amount of water will vary depending on the types of sprinkler heads, the water pressure and the time of day you usually water. Each system will be different and each zone may also be different. Only actual measurement will tell you the length of time to leave a particular zone on.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others. For additional information about all of the county extension services and other articles of interest go to: <http://www.santarosa.fl.gov/extension>